

## Smallest Light by callunavulgari

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**Summary:**

In the summer of 1986, Will's mom marries Jim Hopper. OR, Will and El learn how to be real people again.

# Smallest Light

## Author's Note:

- For [kaikamahine](#).

I've wanted to write Will and Eleven as step-siblings with a weird psychic bond for a million years. Finally got around to finishing it. Kind of, sort of related to the prompt that [kaikamahine](#) gave me back in 2016 for 'things you said when we were eighteen.' The first episode of Stranger Things took place in 1983, when Will was twelve, so this fic starts when they're fifteen and ends when they're eighteen.

Title from [Smallest Light](#), by Ingrid Michaelson, which was listened to on repeat while writing the first half of this. [These two](#) fanvids helped me out with the other half.

In the summer of 1986, Will's mom marries Jim Hopper. It's a small ceremony that they hold in their backyard, near the very back where their land meets the border of the woods. There are maybe twenty people total -- Will's friends and their parents, Jonathan, Nancy, Steve, a couple of people from Hopper's station, a friend or two that his mom had lost touch with over the years -- and that's it.

There's no music until after the ceremony, and throughout it all, the endless drone of cicadas deafens him to anything else. Sweat beads at the neckline of his suit and his tie feels like its choking him, but Will stays quiet. He's a groomsman.

After, when Jonathan has set up his record player and Hopper is arguing with Will's mom over what to play for the first dance, Will goes inside and sits in the empty bathtub. His hands are shaking, and he's sweating, the heat building inside of him -- it *burns*. He presses his forehead to the cool lip of the tub and breathes as steadily as he can for ten minutes.

Twenty.

Thirty.

Will loses track of the time, instead watching the progress of the shadows against the tiles. He won't ruin this for them. He won't.

He doesn't know what time it is when there's a quiet knock on the door, just that it's getting steadily darker. Probably sundown or close to it. He swallows convulsively, wipes the sweat from his upper lip and sits up straight, but leaves his back to the door. He takes a minute to form the thought, as real and as solidly inviting as he can make it- *You can come in.*

The door swings open, and a moment later he hears it shut again with a quiet click. Fabric rustles, and then someone is climbing into the bathtub beside him.

"Okay?" Eleven asks in a quiet whisper, carefully nudging his shoulder with hers. Will's lips quirk upwards and he nudges back.

"Mm," he says, clenching his eyes tight for a moment. When he opens them again, there are dark spots in his vision. "Sort of. Maybe."

"But you will be?" she presses, and Will sighs, turning to look at her.

The dress that Joyce had picked out for her bridesmaids is a light, silvery blue fabric, with -- as Will understands it -- fewer ruffles than are currently in fashion. The sleeves are a little puffy, but it suits El.

The skirt pools around them in waves of silky fabric. Will touches it, pinching the cloth between two fingers and rubbing them together. Somehow, the dress manages to feel a little like water.

"Yeah," he says tiredly, meeting her eyes. The first thing that Will had learned about Eleven was the intensity of her gaze. It was hard to look at her straight on, like she was a car crash or a star going nova. A brightness that had nothing to do with her manner and everything to do with her *presence*, as dangerous as she was mesmerizing.

Power, he'd thought, looking at her still and silent in Hopper's arms. There was a smear of dirt down the left side of her face and crusty red blood staining the place between her nose and mouth. She'd looked as tired as he felt, and Will, still reeling from the feel of the

monster inside him and the heat that came after, thought that she looked like the most powerful person in the world.

He tries to smile at her. "I will be."

She cocks her head at him, squinting almost suspiciously, and then reaches out, wiping a bead of sweat away from his temple.

"Too hot?" she asks, her face crumpling with understanding, and Will winces, curling his arms tight around his vulnerable middle as if that will help hide his secrets. Eleven, he thinks, probably knows more about what happened to him than he's ever managed to tell the others. It's okay, though. She'll keep his secrets.

He nods, miserably, and she moves a little further away from him. Above them, the air conditioning kicks on.

Will smiles at her. "Thanks."

"Come out soon, okay?" she says, carefully climbing out of the tub. A flash of bare ankle winks at him when she moves, and he smiles wider, wondering how long it took her after the ceremony to dump the sparkly shoes.

"Promise," he agrees with a nod.

Eleven feels Will sometimes. More than the others. More than Mike and the tumultuous toss of feelings that is the inside of his head, more than Dustin whose brain seems to be an endless stream of pointless trivia and movie quotes, more than Lucas who is quiet and kind, or Max who is brash and loud.

Will creeps in when she isn't paying attention, his thoughts so like hers. They're a matched set, him and her.

She feels it when he leaves the ceremony, his panic thrumming between them like a cord. It sets her on edge, coloring all of her thoughts a dingy grey even as Mike's sister whirls her around the grass to a song that she's never heard before. It's bright and cheerful, and the grass is thick and soft against the soles of her feet, warm

from the late summer sun.

There's water dripping wherever Will is, a quiet tap-tap-tap against porcelain or tile, with a faint echo that suggests a bathroom.

El waits until the song is over, and then trips away from Nancy, her chest so tight with feelings that it seems like it might burst. On the other side of the lawn, Mike and Dustin are arguing about something. She brushes against the edges of their minds, a tentative touch to reassure herself more than anything, but finds that whatever it is they're fighting about, it isn't serious. Their thoughts are still rose-tinged with happiness. The anger won't grow.

No one watches her go.

The inside of the house is quieter, already dim as the sun droops lower in the sky. She hums a little as she walks, trailing her fingers along the walls. It's a happy house, echoes of memories in the paint. She lets it talk to her, guiding her to where Will is.

She knocks, and he lets her in.

It storms that night, one of the huge swells that sweep in from the southwest, bringing with it sheets of rain and booming loud thunder. He's reading a book when the light flickers and goes out, and for a moment, his heart jumps into his throat, fear making his pulse pound. He closes his eyes and counts to ten, breathes deep.

He holds it, then breathes out. Better.

Jonathan is in town for the weekend, staying in their mom's room with Nancy since Eleven's taken up residence of his old bedroom. They're supposedly staying to watch Will and Eleven while mom and Hopper are on their honeymoon, but Will thinks they're just there to make sure he doesn't disappear again.

His mom had sat him down, and told him to call if he needed anything. Anything.

She'd been bad about leaving him alone, after.

His door creaks open and Will looks over just as the light next to his bed flickers back on. On silent feet, El pads across the room and slides onto the end of his bed, tucking her feet under the blankets next to his. She sniffs, carelessly wiping the blood from her nose.

He looks at the light, then back to her.

“Isn’t that a waste of your powers?” he asks with a small smile.

She shrugs, wiggling down the bed until she’s laying down too, her feet level with his armpits.

“Maybe,” she says. “But you weren’t done.”

Will looks at the book in his lap. He hasn’t finished the chapter yet. Probably couldn’t sleep even if he’d finished the next chapter or the one after that. It’s that kind of night. He flicks a glance at her, feels her cold toes against his ribs.

“Want me to read to you?” he asks, and knows that she was listening to him read before she even came into the room. He pretends not to know and she nods, taking the extra pillow that he passes her and tucking it beneath her curly head.

“I like Meg,” she says sleepily an hour later, when he’s finished another chapter.

“Meg’s good,” Will says. “Charles Wallace is my favorite though. People don’t understand him, because he’s not what they expect.”

“Mm,” Eleven agrees, her eyes drifting closed. The light at his bedside flickers twice before it goes out.

“Goodnight, El,” Will whispers, and curls up so that her shins are pressed up against his spine.

The first Christmas that she spends with her new family is spent huddled miserably in bed, used tissues scattered across the floor and bedspread, landmines of viscous green snot that everyone has to carefully tiptoe around whenever they enter her room. The last time

she'd sneezed, she blew up the bowl of soup Joyce had brought her.

She sleeps through most of it, but in her fever daze she can faintly hear Hopper singing Christmas songs in the kitchen, Joyce shrieking with laughter, and under all of that, she can feel Will's quiet and steady amusement. It makes her feel cold and alone, huddled on the bed, so she turns her face into the pillow and sleeps some more.

When she wakes up in the morning, the Christmas tree is in her doorway. It's a small tree, but the star is still tilted alarmingly at the top, knocked askew from where it's been partially wedged against the doorframe.

She sits up, and finds everyone crowded around her floor in their pajamas. The snot rags are nowhere to be seen, but Jonathan and Nancy are there, still dressed for driving across four states. There's a ketchup stain on Jonathan's sleeve.

Will is the first to notice that she's awake, smiling blindingly up at her and leaping up off the floor and straight onto her shins, where he sits and grins.

"Merry Christmas," he tells her, his voice quieter than his thoughts, which are positively vibrating with pleasure so loud that she has to carefully reel her mind away from his.

Everyone else takes up the greeting, and it's loud again, but in a good way, because Joyce is pressing a plateful of waffles into her hands as Hopper sets a glass of orange juice on the bedside table. They talk as she picks at her food, about the Christmas dinner that Jonathan and Nancy weren't here for, and how their drive was, and if anything interesting was happening at NYU.

When she's done eating, El asks, "Why?"

They go quiet, and turn to look at her.

"Why, what, sweetie?" Joyce asks, sharing a bewildered look with Hopper.

Eleven's insides feel too warm. She doesn't know how to say it, doesn't know how to *ask*, so instead, she gestures around her -- at

them, the tree, the presents carefully gathered and replaced under the tree -- and repeats, this time with tears in her eyes, “*Why?*”

“Honey,” Hopper says, after a very careful look around the room. He smiles at her, tentatively, and leans in to loop an arm around her shoulders. His beard scratches her cheek when he presses a kiss to her temple. “It’s Christmas.”

Will blinks at her, his weight warm and welcome across her legs and says, earnestly, “We didn’t want you to be alone on Christmas, so we brought it to you.”

She chuckles weakly, her cheeks hot, blurry eyesight telling her that she’s fighting a losing battle.

“The living room is twenty feet away. I could have walked,” she tells them, and bursts into tears.

Everyone crowds onto the bed to hug her, even Nancy, and for a long moment it’s just them crowding her in. She can feel every single one of their minds, bright and warm and happy, just so happy to be with her. She doesn’t know what she did to deserve this, and says as much.

“Oh, sweetie,” Joyce murmurs, rocking her a little, a callused hand stroking El’s dirty hair. Will’s hand tightens around hers, and above them, Hopper lets out a soft curse, sounding overwhelmed, and hugs her tighter.

It’s the first time that El thinks of them as family.

“You’re all going to get sick later,” she tells them, still sniffing, and melts into the embrace.

The week that El first gets her period, the fair is in town. They’re on the ferris wheel, Mike, El, and Will all crammed onto one while Max, Lucas, and Dustin share another. Their knees knock together, hips pressed uncomfortably against knobby hips, but Mike is like a furnace, so at least it’s warm.

Halfway up on their second rotation, El sucks in a breath, touches her



stomach, and says, in an uncomfortable sort of way, "Ow."

She says it like she's confused, and Will and Mike both look at her.

"You all right?" Mike asks, and Will starts to touch her shoulder, which are creeping ever upwards.

"Hurts," is all she says, and then the ferris wheel groans and starts taking them in the opposite direction.

They manage to get her to a bathroom before she destroys anything, and Will and Max take turns sitting with her on the floor for the next half hour while she sweats through the worst of the cramps.

Afterwards, they buy her cotton candy, which she eats haltingly, one arm still curled around her stomach. Lucas, the best shot among them, is elected as the representative to win her the giant teddy bear that's dangling over the pellet guns. It takes him three tries, but he grins shyly at her when he hands it over.

"You got yours pretty late," Max tells El in a carrying whisper when they're on the way back home. "I got mine the summer we moved here."

"It's horrible," El whispers back, her face haunted. "Can't I make it stop?"

Max shrugs. "My mom says it won't stop until we're a lot older."

When they drop Max off, Will scoots across the seat and takes El's hand.

"We can read some of the new book I got from the library before bed tonight," he offers. "Mom says that a hot water bottle helps."

She sighs and slumps into his side, just a little.

"That would be nice," she mumbles, and falls asleep on his shoulder for the rest of the drive back.

“What is El short for anyway? Isn’t your name Jane?” Sarah from biology asks her. There’s a beer bottle dangling precariously from her lax grip, and she’s listing to one side, her eyes hazy with drink. El can barely hear her over the pounding of the music, and her own beer bottle sits warming between her thighs, untouched.

She has a headache, from the music and the couple sips of Mike’s beer she’d taken before Will had warned her off of it.

*Eleven*, she almost says, not thinking, her lips already parting on the word.

Sitting quietly beside her, Will lays a hand on top of hers. She looks at him.

“Elizabeth,” he tells Sarah, softly, his lips quirking around one of those guileless, charming smiles of his. “Middle name.”

“Oh,” Sarah says, and staggers off into another corner, where there’s more interesting people to bother. Chad something from the football team loops an arm around her waist and mutters something quiet into her ear that makes her laugh. His thoughts are gross, but not dangerous, so she leaves them be.

“You lied,” El says mildly, raising an eyebrow.

Will shrugs. “Sometimes we have to. You know that.”

She does know that. She *does*, it’s just hard to remember sometimes. Her head hurts and she wants to go home, but the others had wanted to crash the party, so here she is. She rubs her temples, groaning a little. The beer in her lap is solely for decoration, but she wants badly to take a sip.

Will’s eyes sharpen as he looks at her. “Are you okay? You look like crap.”

She gestures around them -- to the music, the flashing lights, and the endless sea of their inebriated classmates. “Loud,” she explains.

Will looks at her for another minute, then nods decisively, leaving her side to wade through all the bodies. He vanishes around the

corner into what she thinks might be the kitchen.

She's only alone for a minute or so, and when Will comes back he's dragging Mike and Max behind him. Mike looks like he'd been protesting, but the minute he sees her his eyes go soft with concern. He seats himself in the spot Will had vacated, looping an arm around her shoulders. Max takes a seat on her other side, sprawling a little. Both of their faces are red and sweaty.

"You all right?" Mike asks her, leaning in close. His breath smells like beer.

"I'm fine," she says, glaring at Will. He crosses his arms across his chest and scowls right back. "Just loud."

"We can go," Max tells her, tossing her hair back over one shoulder. She's disappointed, El thinks, but hiding it well. She'd go, if El asked her to. They all would.

"It's okay," El tells them, smiling. "I'll go outside, get some fresh air."

Without waiting for them to protest, El slides off the couch and crosses the room quickly, nudging the minds of those she passes to get them out of the way.

Outside, the air is crisp with the suggestion of an early winter. There's only a few people on the porch, most of which are glued at the mouth, so she walks a little farther out, until the yard has given way to a line of dark, shadowy trees, their bony branches outstretched overhead like skeletal fingers. She takes a seat at the base of the biggest one, fingers curling around the beer that she's still hanging onto. El frowns at it, then takes a tentative sip. At the taste, she wrinkles her nose and tosses the bottle a few feet away from her, letting the foul liquid drain out into the roots of the trees.

The damp of the grass is creeping into the fabric of her jeans, but she doesn't mind much. It's better out here, where the sound from the party is so muffled that she can hear the croak and caw of the forest creatures in the dark.

A few minutes go by before Will takes a seat beside her.

“Sorry,” he says, after a minute.

El tips her head back to stare at the sky, huge and dark above them. A yawning chasm of black, dotted with faint pinpricks of light. She blinks, seeking out the constellations Hopper had showed her when she was still new to the idea of family.

“It’s okay,” she tells him with a shrug, her eyes still fixed on a brighter dot of light that she thinks might be Saturn. “They’re having fun. I don’t want them to stop because of me.”

Will gives her a judgemental look and jostles her shoulder with his. It’s become a familiar gesture, one she that she welcomes and returns with a small grin and a nudge of her own.

“I don’t like parties either,” he confesses, wringing his fingers in his lap.

She looks again at the stars, then closes her eyes, reaching out with her mind and tapping each of their friends in turn. They’re all safe, happy bright points of light in her head, like the stars so far above her. In the living room of the house, she can see through Max’s eyes to where Dustin is dancing.

“I know,” she says, and takes his hand in hers.

When El had first come to school all those years ago, people hadn’t quite understood her. Will heard kids sometimes talk about how she was slow or stupid, because she didn’t understand some things. Because she didn’t talk a lot and she dressed like a boy.

He had found her in a janitor’s closet her second week of school, her knees pulled up to her chin, her arms tucked tight around them, clutching tight. She was shaking, her entire body trembling, and for a moment, Will thought that she was crying. But then she’d looked up at him, and he saw that she wasn’t sad at all. She was angry.

He closed the door behind him and sat down next to her, his back propped up against a mop bucket. Everything smelled like damp, and

it had hurt for a minute, pressed him all the way back to the Upside Down in the quiet dark, breathing in the wet air and singing to himself -- and then El's hand was in his, clenching tight.

When he looked at her, her jaw was set, locked tight. Still angry. But she squeezed his hand and they sat in silence for a while longer, until the anger passed.

After, she breathed out slow like Will did sometimes when he was trying to remember where he was, and said, "It's hard sometimes, to remember that I can't just hurt them."

Will nodded. Said, "Sometimes, I want to hurt them. Then I remember what it felt like to know that I could."

Her eyes darkened and she breathed out again, real slow. "They're not the bad men."

Will nodded. "They're not the bad men."

Nowadays, they ride to school together. El's bike is newer than his, bought sometime after she and Hopper moved in with Will and his mom, but sometimes she'll trade him for the day, let him ride out ahead of her hard and fast, until his head is somewhere else. He likes her for that, likes her for a lot of things, and thinks that he was crazy for being weird about it at first.

She has first period with him and Dustin, but after that they don't see each other again until lunch, and then after that they don't see each other again until English just before school lets out. But it's good. She's been doing this long enough now that she's learned how to make people leave her alone without hurting them, and when she doesn't have that, she has Max, who isn't afraid to punch someone in the nose for being a dick.

In fourth period they're learning how to balance chemical equations when Mike leans over and taps Will on the back.

"Did El come to school with you today?" he asks, and Will blinks, suddenly alert.

He nods slowly, watching the teacher cross the room before he

mouths, “Why?”

“No one has seen her since second period. She’s supposed to have third with Max, but Max says that she wasn’t there.”

Will stares straight ahead of him for awhile, then raises his hand and asks to go to the nurse.

The halls are quiet, and this close to the gym, everything smells a little bit like feet. He cuts straight through the gym and out the side door, around to the bleachers near the back. He ducks beneath them, and curls his lip at all the rotting food and gross condoms that litter the ground back here, cigarette butts poking up through the weeds like daisies.

El is sitting on a rock near the middle, a cigarette smoldering between her fingers. There’s blood on her chin, more on her knuckles.

“That’s gross,” Will says, and sits next to her.

“It is gross,” she says mournfully, and flicks it at a orange that’s fleshy rind has gone thick with green and white mold a few feet away. She tucks her hands together between her knees and looks at him sheepishly. “It doesn’t look gross when it’s them doing it.”

“Who?” Will asks, frowning.

El shrugs. “Your mom. Hopper. Steve, sometimes.”

Will sits there with her for awhile, kicking at bits of trash. Somewhere, a bell rings, and he thinks that Mike will probably be looking for them.

“What happened?”

El sighs, sagging into him, and chuckles mirthlessly. Then again, louder, a little more real, until she’s doubled over and gasping. Will waits her out, watching.

“I punched someone,” she says between desperate giggles. He thinks that she might be crying a little. “They were being a jerk and I just --

I punched them.”

“Did it feel good?” Will asks, curious.

She nods, then shakes her head, then nods again. She’s trembling, like before, like that first time that Will realized that he was good at finding El whenever she was hiding from the rest of the world. He’s always wondered how much of that is their connection and how much is her wanting to be found.

“It felt good,” she tells him, desperately gulping in air. “And then it felt bad.”

“So you hid,” Will finishes, nodding.

“So I hid.”

“Okay,” Will says. “But we’re gonna be late for lunch if we don’t go now, and you know that the rest of them are just going to come find us.”

El nods again and slumps a little more heavily into him. She doesn’t move to get up, so Will sighs and bends down to unzip his bookbag. It takes him a minute or so of rooting around inside of it before he finds his lunch bag, partially squished between two text books. He gets out two sandwiches and passes one to her.

Hopper had started making Will take both of their lunches the third time that El had just taken a box of waffles to school. She grimaces a little when she bites into it, but chews dutifully anyway. She hates bologna day.

By the time they’ve started on their apples, Max and Dustin have both found them and gone back to find the others.

“You know Max is going to want the details, right?” Will says around a mouthful of bologna.

El raises an eyebrow at him, and makes a shrugging motion with her shoulders. She swallows a bite of sandwich and smiles, a flash of white teeth. “I know.”

Eleven turns eighteen the autumn that Steve gives Dustin his BMW. Dustin crows about it for weeks, his face jubilant, his mind a mess of delight. He treats it like a child, cooing as his fingers stroke the dashboard, and for the rest of the year, he insists on driving them wherever they need to go.

This means that she spends her birthday crammed into the back with Mike, Will, and Max bracketing her in. It's uncomfortable, and there are elbows everywhere, pressing into her spine and ribs and everywhere in between.

Lucas, who had won the game of rock-paper-scissors, smiles smugly back at them from the front seat.

"Ow," she says, when Max's elbow shifts from her ribs and nails her squarely in her left breast. She cups it, wincing, and Max makes an apologetic face in her direction, trying to shift away again. Judging by the muffled curse Mike lets out, her elbows didn't go far.

"I'm sorry, okay," Max hisses, finally managing to wedge herself up against the door. "This is really hard. Dustin, are we there yet?"

"Almost," Dustin singsongs back at them, and then takes a turn so sharply that Max tumbles right back into El's lap.

They pile out of the car on a stretch of road that looks unremarkable. There are corn fields stretching off into the distance on their left, and something that looks like apple trees on their right.

Lucas is the one who asks the question that they're all thinking.

"Dustin, *why* are we here?"

"Hold on a second, *jesus*," Dustin says from the vicinity of his trunk. He's digging around for something, muttering as he goes. As El watches, a pair of dirty socks fall out onto the road. He surfaces a moment later with a large picnic basket and a bottle of something in his hands.

He brandishes them both in triumph. "Ta-da!"



“Is that wine?” Max asks, sidling up to his side and snatching the bottle out of his hands. She squints down at it and blinks. “Jesus, it is.”

Dustin shrugs, looking embarrassed. He darts a look at El, and then away again. “I figured, it’s not really fair that we can get drunk without worrying about setting things on fire with our minds, and you can’t. Out here, you don’t have to worry about it.” He pauses. “Much.”

“Your grand plan was to get Eleven drunk in a cornfield?” Lucas asks sceptically.

Dustin makes a face. “I was thinking the orchard, not the cornfield, actually.”

Privately, El thinks that setting fire to an orchard in the middle of nowhere is just as bad as setting fire to Hawkins, but she appreciates the thought anyway. She smiles at Dustin, and takes the bottle from Max.

“Maybe not drunk,” she says over her shoulder as she sets off towards the trees. “But I’ll try a bit.”

And she does. They eat sandwiches and pluck apples from nearby trees in the dappled sunlight, shining them on their shirtsleeves and taking huge bites, juice dribbling out onto their chins. El drinks enough of the wine that she starts to feel warmed through, like the sunshine is making a home in her gut. It’s oddly pleasant, and the bubbly feeling inside of her makes her laugh more than usual.

When they start a game of hide and seek, she sits it out, laying back on the checkered blanket that Dustin had stashed in the basket, and closing her eyes.

She feels Will before she sees him, and a small smile flickers across her lips. With a small jerk of her head she sets the bottle of half-drunk wine floating off towards him, and he catches it with a small laugh.

He sits beside her, and even though her eyes are closed, she knows

that he's watching the others as he drinks.

She cracks one eye open and peers at him. "Thought you would have been playing."

Will shrugs. "I'm too good at hiding. Figured I'd give someone else a chance."

El hums, and tries not to think about the last time that Will had to hide from something. Her breathing goes a little uneven, but she very carefully guides her thoughts away from the memories. They won't do her any good here.

"Bet you could find them in two seconds," Will says, lazily shielding his eyes from the sunlight filtering in through the trees. When he glances her way, she grins at him, and with a flick of her hand, plucks their friends out of their hiding places and sends them soaring up to the top of the trees, where they dangle, glaring at her.

"Powers are cheating, El!" Max hollers back at her, her face red, her feet kicking wildly.

Eleven laughs and carefully sets them all back down on their feet.

"I win," she tells them simply, still grinning.